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Marching on the streets is saying it – only louder! On the Performance „The Curfew“ at the OFF-Biennale Budapest of Katarina Sevic and GergelyLaszlo

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The Curfew

A PROJECT BY
KATARINA ŠEVIĆ &
GERGELY LÁSZLÓ

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↑ Katarina Šević and Gergely László,
The Curfew, performance, 28th October
2017, Photo by: Boglárka Zellei.

← Katarina Šević and Gergely László,
The Curfew, Costume, leather, 2017.

↓ Security guards, Budapest, 2017.



Marching on the streets is saying it — only louder!

On the street performance
The Curfew by Katarina
Šević & Gergely László

Kata Krasznahorkai

The street is as usual – a stage for a clash between extreme forces capable of bringing about general passivity and frustration in a whole society. Well-situated middle class families and intellectuals strolling around, self-assured they really know how this world goes round – oh you can't tell them anything new, they know what is going on in literature, in music, in theatre, in arts – oh they know everything, just everything. Yet what they do not know is that their understanding of literature, music, theatre and the arts has nothing to do with what is going on outside, outside in the world. They don't seem to recognize that they are in a valley surrounded by huge mountains blocking their view. The street is filled with people. There are the tired housewives, who have given up fighting for a better life. Disillusioned, they are just getting by somehow, looking for any kind of affirmation that what they are doing is worthwhile. So they start to believe the loud voices – heard from inside and from outside – telling them that they are mothers, they are wives, they have to serve their children, their alcoholic, unemployed, xenophobic and vulgar husbands, as well as their "nation" – as they are the machinery that keeps this "nation" alive. They do not hear the silent voices trying to tell them that there is no "nation" anymore – you can stop. There is the old lady, an archetype of the nice and kind grandma. But after petting the head of a small child and saying, "Oh how cute you are," with her next sentence she goes on a rant, raving about Jews, Muslims or any other religion, Gays, Lesbians or any other orientation apart from hetero-normative, people of colour, especially Roma and Sinti, and of course so-called liberals, who cannot be easily identified by appearance, but she knows who they are and by whom they are remote-controlled. Ha, she knows!

Then she continues down the next street, knowing policemen are stationed there all the time, continuing with her fugue of nationalistic xenophobia and constructed realities. She takes advantage of the ready audience for her paranoid hate speeches, a policeman or security-guy or counter-terrorism-special-forces-officer unable to leave their position. But on this same street there are the invisible, silenced hordes of the Homeless and Hopeless as well, those who ended up here perhaps after an ugly divorce, after losing their jobs, or having come from another country with the illusion of a better life, or simply because they were not fully prepared for this life – where there is no poverty anymore, there is only misery. They know this street very well: the stones, the benches, the possible shelters, the stairs, the entrances, and especially the place where the special counter-terrorism forces, the police, the self-proclaimed police troops and employees of the Regulatory Agency stand – *they* are the architecture, defining the street, prompting people to lead their way through this maze in order to avoid any contact with them. Because some of them have seen, or heard, or even experienced how silent, how unbelievably silent it can be on that street when those special forces take you, beat you, spit on you, drag you down and humiliate you with all their might. Up until now only the Homeless and Hopeless are aware that the street doesn't belong to everybody – oh no! – they know that this convention is a shameless lie. No, the streets belong to the Strong and Loud. And having been on these streets day and night, they have noticed, in moments of exceptional consciousness, that year by year, month by month, week by week and finally day by day, these intellectuals, these young families, these housewives, even the yelling old ladies are getting more and more silent and silent and silent and silen... sile... sil... si... sss Through the gloomy fog in their perception they have slowly come to realize that something strange is happening at the biggest transport hub of the city, where the street serves as a certain stage for human mobility, or as a home, as a communication platform, as a meeting point, but mostly as a place where one rushes through as fast as possible – the transfer-zone of the civil public society.



↑ Katarina Šević and Gergely László, *The Curfew*, Mask, leather, 2017.

This is the stage on Saturday, September 30th, 2017 for the performance *The Curfew* by Katarina Šević and Gergely László – a troupe of costumed actors roving through the streets with a giant egg, or, as the artists define it, an “alternative form of public demonstration.” A horde of people, mostly young and strong, are roaming about the square. They are strolling around yet focusing on one point; they seem to have a plan, but at the same time, seem to be waiting for orders, some kind of direction, some sense, some initiative from someone higher. And in this zone, the strange, costumed ensemble patrols through the square. This troupe reminds the public on the streets of security forces, but something is strange, something is different. These people wear leather vests (but clearly not those bullet-proof ones) with those stripes that are hated so much, fluorescing as forces patrol in the night. And this bunch of people have on ridiculous, no, really stupid short trousers – “Are they wearing their underwear over their trousers? Made of leather! What? What is happening here?”

But soon somebody starts to sing in a far-away corner – everybody looks at that figure, his face veiled by a white mask, everyone except the street musician, who is absolutely undisturbed by the competition. The horde of costumed creatures run towards the person singing in the mask, beat him up, tear at him, spit on him and when he is on the ground not moving anymore, the horde begins to look for new victims on that busy square. And they do not need to wait too long – on another corner, another person with a white mask starts to sing, and again the horde runs to beat him up, tear at him, spit on him and return to look for new victims. This goes on for some time. The scenery reminds onlookers of the contrast between the uncanny and absolute silence, the times when others were beaten up, torn at or spit on by security-forces, boy scouts and counter-terrorism-forces and the brutal yelling, the inarticulate roaring of the Strong and Loud if the silenced would try to sing out – so they remain calm and in wait of what comes next.

Suddenly, as some higher-order object arrives out of nothing, these creatures discover a huge Egg, approximately three metres high, put their noses on the eggshell and start to yell into it, using it as a megaphone, as an amplifier. Everybody stares at it, and a recitation of a text begins by those security-forces. Only some words seep into the audience of the street: “Shut up! Self-censorship!”, “Black milk” – What? – “No prattle, no headache” – Oh yeah, this is really true! – “Pst! Pst! Peace” – aha... – or “dead silence and stone deafness” – I heard that before somewhere – “on your lips as in your heart” – Oh no, this brings only problems... – “that is the least” – Oh really? – “Live and let it live” – Also my motto – “Black milk of daybreak we shovel a grave...” – What is this again?

It is recited in a rhythm that forces movement, slowly, then faster and faster; it is like a march, one of those songs by soldiers, boy scouts, or other militarized groups trying to gather strength and courage from collective recital and performative repetition. And really the troupe starts to move, all in one rhythm. At the end the Law of the Curfew is recited over and over again, omnipresent in daily life, it is something everybody knows:

It is an offence to make excessive noise in a residential area, in any building or grounds therein, on public transport, or in any reserve or protected area, which is likely to disturb the peace of others or interfere with a natural or protected resource.

Permitted noise does not constitute an offence even if the noise appears excessive within its environment. Noise from construction, renovation or restoration is permitted. It is not an offence to use a pneumatic drill at night during roadworks in an emergency, though it is unreasonable to use one during planned roadworks on a Sunday morning.

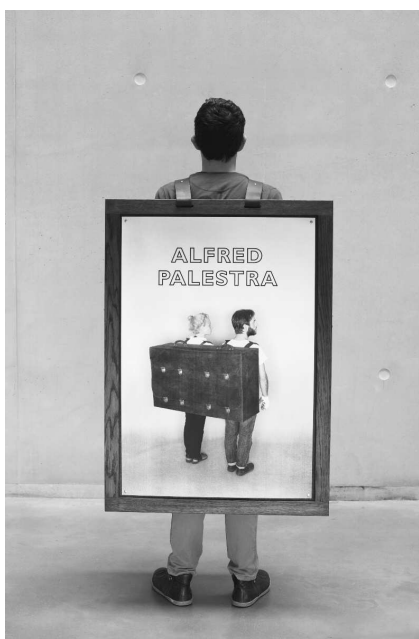
There must be around a dozen people in costume now pushing the Egg, in a metal frame on wheels, slowly disappearing in the side streets. After they disappear, everybody who witnessed this strange parade knew that something inexplicable and incomprehensible had happened – as the aggressive, brutal, idiotic horde, ruling and dominating the streets made a 180-degree-turn, and with the help of the Egg, became human.

This last part of – a troupe of costumed actors roving through the streets, or as the artists define it, an “alternative form of public demonstration” *The Curfew* is hard to believe. This moment when something happens and these idiots, this aggressive wave of yelling, sadistic forces terrorizing the streets and public life become human again. In the performance they go through a metamorphosis: after their charade as members of security- and counter-terrorism forces or other paramilitary groups, they turn into a speaking choir reciting a poem by the Hungarian poet and writer Krisztián Peer into the “talking egg” functioning like a megaphone – amplifying their reborn voices. But it is this part of reality, which can only come true in a play, in a fairy tale, in a commedia. The relationship between reality and performance is forcefully exposed to the reality of life in street performances – and this is the transitory zone where the boundaries between the zone of art, play, fairy tale or commedia on the one hand, and the zone of life on the other, get blurred. As a genre, street performance as a demonstration has many historical antecedents in Hungarian performance history, for example if we think on the “Zero-Demonstrations” by Endre Tót or the carnevalesque street-demonstration



↑ Katarina Šević and Gergely László, *The Curfew*, Mask, leather, 2017.

→ Katarina Šević and Tehnica Schweiz (Gergely László & Péter Rákosi), Alfred Palestra, performance in the gym of Lycée Emile Zola, Rennes, 2014



↑ Katarina Šević and Tehnica Schweiz (Gergely László & Péter Rákosi), *Alfred Palestra*, Backhead Mask, 2014

↑ Katarina Šević and Tehnica Schweiz (Gergely László & Péter Rákosi), *Alfred Palestra*, Sandwichman, 2014



of the Kassák Studio Theatre led by Péter Halász in Budapest in 1972 later becoming an important new wave of performance and theatre productions involving the streets in the Squat Theatre in New York. Also internationally, especially since the 1960s and 1970s there was a wave of street-actions and protests in performative form from the “Sit-ins” during the US civil rights movement to demonstrations against South- and Middle-American dictatorships to striking political acts on the streets that coined a whole era, like the inflammation of Jan Palach in Prague, that fuelled the Prague Spring 1969. In the recent years the demonstrations against right-wing governments in Hungary and Poland have decisive performative formats as well (so in the protest against the educational system in Hungary with the protest of the “checked-shirts” or Black Monday, the protest against abortion laws in Poland).

But there is major difference between performative actions on the streets as demonstrations as a sign of protest and performance art. In her major anthology on street performance Cohen-Cruz lists an impressive list of performative actions in texts by renowned protagonists of theatre and performance, but the majority of those examples reflect performative actions in the public sphere – and not works by artists who use this artistic form to enhance and catalyse their protest via performance art, using the street as a stage. The same problem between the “street” and the “performance area” appears in the long traditions of performative actions in the streets from Breton’s Dada performances to Milan Knížák, Happsoc I, Schlingensief, Żmijewski, Kateřina Šedá or Paweł Althamer. In recent theoretical discourse on performance art, the social aspect is making place for another important aspect of the performative trun, namely the connection between contemporary

dance and performance since the 1990s as is pointed out in *Is the Living Body the Last Thing Left Alive?: The New Performance Turn, Its Histories and Its Institutions*.¹ *The Curfew* brings back the aesthetic into socially engaged street-art that Claire Bishop was missing so much, not “outsourcing” or “delegating” the performance in performance art and refers to the dance-aspect by choreographed bodies simultaneously moving in public space.² *The Curfew* is strictly choreographed, it has clear historical references to the tradition of Commedia del Arte showing the tragic in humorous and grotesque forms, using the topoi of the “mask” and the “costume” going back to theatre of Antique tradition through the Renaissance up until today and presenting an iconographically heavily loaded motif – the egg – in a new shape and a new form. There were long preparatory talks between the artists and Krisztián Peer concerning the script – which turned out to be a protest poem – and the composer of the choir-piece Dóra Halas, two experts on reviving commedia dell arte traditions Balázs Várnai and Krisztián Simon gave training sessions (and performed themselves) to the performers on how to move or speak simultaneously in a crowd, a training and methodology of gram-melot was applied as Peer’s text was cited in reverse at the beginning of the choir piece and hereby it is important to remember that originally grammelot was used to overcome, blur and camouflage critical texts from censors.

¹ Cosmin Costinaş, Ana Janevski, eds., *Is the Living Body the Last Thing Left Alive?: The New Performance Turn, Its Histories and Its Institutions* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017).

² Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London/New York, 2012), 282.

Šević and László have used different ways and sorts of stages in their earlier works, but up until *The Curfew*, never the street. Here the street becomes a stage where a theatrical, performative format originating in the grotesque and the grammelot is re-performed, so that those historical references are dominating the aesthetic and artistic character of the project. This is all the more the case, as language is the main material that this performance is made of – the “poetic of performance” as Richard Schechner puts it is coming from the interaction of the textual, poetic layers sang by a choir – layers that are running partly parallel so one cannot really “understand” what is said.³ These layers of texts overlapping each other were also present in *Alfred Palestra* (2014/2015) where multiple layers of texts and voices became the subject of a performance with the aim “to comprehend plural narratives.”⁴ The students participating in the project had shown how “a multitude of voices overlapped and challenged the observer’s sense of interpretation.”⁵ Another piece by Šević and László using pluralistic voices in a text-reading-choir was in *Stummer Diener* (2014) when a choir was citing texts by Max Frisch endlessly standing around a specially designed “monument,” the “Stummer Diener”. It is also these monuments, like the Stummer Diener, the *Backhead Masks*, the *Monument of the Breaking Sword* or the *Sandwichman* in *Alfred Palestra* that connects with the *The Curfew* – in this case with the Egg as a mobile monument.

Re-citing and re-performing is always a political act. Transferred to 2017 into the reality of the Budapest-streets as a stage, this is all the more the case in *The Curfew* citing the passage “Black milk of daybreak we shovel a grave in the ground he commands us to play up for the dance...” by Paul Celan that is the key to the understanding of the many layers of this public street performance. “Black milk...” – serving as the final lines of the poem *Found Fugue* by Krisztián Peer written specifically for *The Curfew* – is a citation of one of the most well-known Holocaust-poems, the *Death Fugue* by Paul Celan that generated a massive debate on the role of the arts after the Holocaust. Celan responds to his critics, who were especially outraged by his strong metaphors accusing him of writing a poem after the Holocaust, (in complete accordance with Adorno) by declaring these poetic images and metaphors as reality itself. This means the poetic force of language cannot be expropriated by art only, it is part of reality, of everybody’s reality (as there is only one), so it is getting real in the performance as well. Peter Handke criticises Brecht’s “street theatre” and his alleged proximity to “the people” exactly because of this rift that Adorno is referring to between realities of art and realities of life.⁶

CSENDRENDELET THE CURFEW

Text: Krisztián PEER
Music: Dóra HALAS

A Improvisation with the words “Shut up!”, “Quiet!”, “Shhh already!” read backwards without a fixed tempo, slowly turning the inarticulate speech into understandable words (the following are just examples)

B Once the words are clear (after the drum begins), improvise freely, but rhythmically with them

White noise: SSS... SZ...

Fireworks: P SZ T P SZ T Peace freely, not at the same time as all the others

C The drum beat gives the sign to the choir to start Like beatboxing Loud and clear

D Like robots

Only during repetition: Szív! Száj! Hang! Né-ma csönd és hul-la-szag. Né-ma csönd és hul-la-szag. Dead silence and stone deafness. Dead silence and stone deafness.

Soft and velvety 3, 4 Ne szólj szám, nem fáj fejem. No prattle, no headache.

Continues in the same manner (with changing measures)

(sound of tongue) (sound of heartbeat) (sound of mouth) (sound of voice)

³ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (1977; New York: 2003), 170.

⁴ Katarina Šević, Technica Schweiz, *Alfred Palestra. Where the crisis of the Republic coincides with the birth of pataphysics* (Rennes/Berlin/Budapest/Žuljana: 2014–2015), 11.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Peter Handke, “Theater-in-the-Street and Theatre-in-Theaters,” in *Radical Street Performance. An International Anthology*, ed. Jan Cohen-Cruz (New York: 1998), 7–13.

† Musical score for the choir piece *The Curfew*, composed by Dóra Halas. Text by Krisztián Peer. Translated by András Gerevich and Andrew Fetham, 2017.

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1, 2. Né - ma csönd és hul - la - szag. Né - ma csönd és
Dead silence and stone deafness. Dead silence and

3, 4. Neszólj szám, nem fáj fejem. Hyterically Ne szólj szám, No prattle, no headache. No prattle,

5, 6. De akkor meg mi nek a fej? a száj, de ak kor meg mi nek a fej? a száj! De ak kor meg mi nek a fej? a száj, de
But then what is the mouth and head for? But then what is the mouth and head for? But then what

M.

D.

27

1, 2. hul - la - szag. Gondolat az, a mi a száj-ban szü-le-tik, de meg bün-te-tik, meg szün-te-tik, el - tűn - te-tik.
stone deafness. Thought is born in the mouth, but it's hushed and quashed and crushed.

3, 4. nem fáj fejem. Gondolat az, a mi a száj-ban szü-le-tik, de meg bün-te-tik, meg szün-te-tik, el - tűn - te-tik.
no headache. Thought is born in the mouth, but it's hushed and quashed and crushed.

5, 6. ak-kor meg mi nek a fej? a száj! Gondolat az, a mi a száj-ban szü-le-tik, de meg bün-te-tik, meg szün-te-tik, el - tűn - te-tik.
is the mouth and head for? Thought is born in the mouth, but it's hushed and quashed and crushed.

M.

D.

Screaming: AAA!

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1, 2. Loudly, almost rapping
Accompaniment in a quiet, hushed tone
Pü-der, sűketelés, és
Rubbish, gibberish, and

3, 4. (Meg bün-te-tik, meg - szün-te-tik, el-tűn-te-tik. Meg bün-te-tik, meg - szün - te-tik, el-tűn-te-tik. Meg bün-te-tik) és
(Hushed and quashed and crushed. Hushed and quashed and crushed. Hushed...) and

5, 6. ri - szá, hogwash, be az e-gyik fü-le den és
going in one ear and

M.

D.

⁷Diana Taylor, "Opening Remarks," in eds. Diana Taylor, Juan Villejas, *Negotiating Performance* (Durham/London: 1994), 12.

⁸Artur Żmijewski, *Applied Social Arts* (Dublin: 2010); for the performance theoretical work of Żmijewski see also Sandra Frimmel, Fabienne Liptay, Dorota Sajewska, Sylvia Sasse, eds., *Artur Żmijewski. Kunst als Alibi* (Zürich: 2017).

⁹Piotr Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe* (Chicago: 2012), 101.

¹⁰Bojana Cvejić, Ana Vujanović, *Public Sphere by Performance* (Berlin: 2015). Cvejić/Vujanovic, 2015.

¹¹Judith Malina quoted within Jan Cohen-Cruz, ed., *Radical Street Performance. An International Anthology* (New York: 1998), 151.

Handke stands in for "the people" countering Brecht's premise that they want to have it this way, otherwise they would have changed their situation: "The conditions in which these people live are manufactured as a precaution precisely so that they remain unaware of them, and not only are they unable to will any *change*, they are unable to will anything *at all*."

Handke finishes his polemic attack against Brecht with a statement about where this relationship between "the street" and "reality" could possibly evolve: "It is to be hoped they will go on performing until reality too becomes one single performance area. That would be fine." Diana Taylor states in her performance theory, that "the conscious move out of the 'cultural spaces' in the strictest sense of the word [...] posits that society as a whole is culture – the site in which symbols and identity are forged, negotiated and contested."⁷ It is this reality – the whole society as culture – that is manifested at its core in street performances. The cultural zone, which is becoming one single performance area, is also addressed by Artur Żmijewski, one of the rare artists in the fields of performance- or visual art with his own concise theoretical concept, when he is hitting on the table and shouting in his manifesto *Applied Social Arts* branding the artist as someone who "cannot be taken seriously within many areas of social life."⁸ Written in the 1990s the radical solutions offered in this text have already turned out as a (partial) failure, but at that time this manifesto was a "response to this fundamental weakness of Polish critical art in the 1990s"⁹ – as Piotr Piotrowski puts it – but it wasn't only Polish art that lacked the force of critique at that time. Yugoslav artists of the new art practice movement claimed already in the late 1960s and 1970s "social relevance" for new artistic forms in the public sphere as a reaction of changes in society and addressed this critical potential between performance and the streets with the aim of developing an art form as "an integral part of the criticism of the social praxis, in other words, a revolutionary mechanism for the introduction of qualitative changes into the social praxis."¹⁰

Street art has historically always been a critique of the illiteracy of artists who cannot find the language of the streets and are therefore unable to communicate their thoughts – in short: lacking a voice, the language in dialogue with the audience – or even the lack of possibilities to have this dialogue. As Judith Malina from the Living Theatre points out: "the aesthetic of street theatre is based on trying to understand the language of the people on that street."¹¹ But in *The Curfew* the impossibility or scrutiny of this communication comes to the foreground especially because of the pluralistic voices and the grangelot technique that makes a dialogue hardly impossible.



So it is not by chance that the genre of fugue was chosen in *The Curfew*: in the poem by Peer, in the choir piece and as a reference to Celan's *Death Fugue* (which in its original, first version was only published in Romanian as *Death Tango*). The fugue is a multi-layered zone of pluralistic voices keeping up with each other in a dialogue used by Celan to amplify the desperate dialogue between an "us" – the victims – and a "he" – the "perpetrator". Mass performances of power-representations of the state or the Church between "us" and "them" are heavily instrumentalized – as is strikingly clear in Żmijewski's work *Them* 2007. But the "you" was missing. The consequences of eliminating "you" in the language are what Knausgård pointed out so expressively in his four hundred-page analysis of *Mein Kampf* and the early years of Hitler – arguing that the missing "you" in the thought and language of Hitler is a crucial point of understanding his background – and what came next. "You" refers to a partnership in dialogues, the private, individual perspective – and if it is lost, then it is the individual loss of voicing. Lamping is referring to these missing voices in his analyses of *Death Fugue* interpreting Celan's embracing of the victims as "a sign of an extraordinary human engagement" whereby the pluralistic speech from the "us-perspective" is the "canon of Jewish voices of the muted."¹²

The muted victims and muted crowds are the addressees of *The Curfew*. It has no aspirations of changing society, of getting nationalistic radical xenophobic racists on the side of liberal and tolerant leftist and socially sensible individuals – but it says "You" and points at "you" as an individual not being silent, not being muted and hushed, not being a coward, opportunistic family man, housewife or intellectual. Just shout out loud, say it on the streets, and the Egg will help amplify your voice. Play it, play it out loud and don't be bothered about the Strong and Loud – you can say it louder with the help of your Egg.

In the late afternoon of September 30th, 2017, after the troupe with their costumes and masks and poems had disappeared upon the invisible command of some invisible force again, the Egg disappeared as well. But the old lady – still following the event – was so outraged how come this could have happened here, in this nice city, and there are these, there are these, these.....and she snapped after some air, the surrounding passers-by were a bit worried because her face was red from anger, and she stumbled and yelled again: that these....artists can rampage and vandalize these nice streets here – and called for the police. It was the same old lady who was yelling at Christoph Schlingensiefel in 2000, when Schlingensiefel had his *Ausländer raus-detention-container* (*Please Love Austria*) as a performative monument in the middle of Vienna, shouting in a megaphone, generating a flamboyant and embarrassingly hatred-filled debate that stripped bare the hypocrisy of Austrian society – that has an uncanny actuality today. This nice old lady in 2017 had already been there in 2000 next to this detention container infuriated; and in lack of proper verbal articulation she could only spit out at Schlingensiefel: "You.....artist!"

¹² See Dieter Lamping, "Sind Gedichte über Auschwitz barbarisch? Über die Humanität der Holocaust-Lyrik," in *Literatur und Theorie. Über poetologische Probleme der Moderne* (Göttingen: 1999), in particular 106–118.

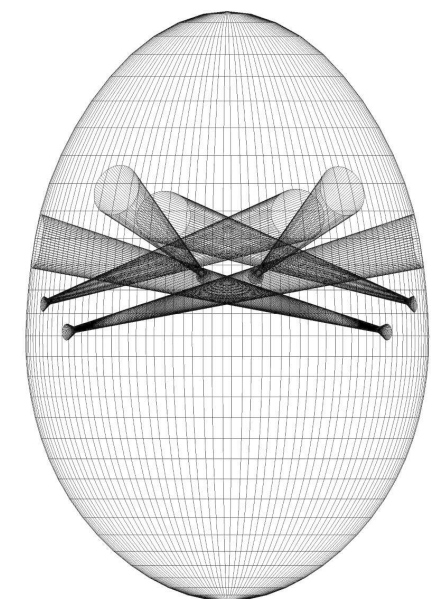
The Curfew written and directed by Katarina Šević and László Gergely, Text: Krisztián Peer, Composer: Dóra Halas, Members of the troupe: Szaffi Asbóth, Orsolya Balogh, Ádám Boros, Kincső Bödecs, István Bukovics, Judit Sára Elek, Krisztina Erdei, Anna Forgács, Nándor Hevesi, Ferenc Kovács Royal, Dániel Lang, Gergely László, Bogi Lutz, Katarina Šević, Lulu Schnee, Bea Selmeczi, Krisztián Simó, Dániel Sipos, Máté Szilvay, Zsófia Váradi, Balázs Várnai, 2017, commissioned by the OFF Biennale Budapest, exists as a live street performance acted out in Budapest on the 30th September and the 28th October 2017, as a storyboard with all relevant references and context provided by the artists and as the film *The Curfew* of 10 minutes, edited by the artists.



↑ Katarina Šević and Gergely László, *Stummer Diener*, photo documentation of the object, 2013

Stummer Diener is an object and at once a device for continuous performative act. The choir stands in a circle around this object and ritually repeats the selected admonitions from the book in a given order, repeatedly. The piece is based on the 1958 drama by Max Frisch, *Biedermann und die Brandstifter* (*The Fire Raisers*). The title of the piece, *Stummer Diener* (translates to mute servant) comes from the German name for the furniture type that became popular in homes of the expanding middle class during the Biedermeier period.

← Katarina Šević and Gergely László, *The Curfew*, performance, 28th October 2017, Photo by: Boglárka Zellei.



↑ *The Curfew*, Egg, 3D drawing showing the inside position of megaphones, 2017

Flowers of Upheaval

Zsófia Bán

Here is an odd thought: decades from now we (or those of us still around) will refer to this period as *the tens*. Oh, those disastrous, miserable tens! But at least the early tens (cf.: *protest optimism*). A century ago no one had suspected that the First World War would break out and the world order that defined their lives would collapse and give way to a different kind of world whose impact and consequences would be felt even a century later. And when, from a future European Hungary, we look back – okay, let's not be silly, when our children look back – at the early tens of our century, it will almost certainly turn out that we spent most of our time in this great homeland of ours engaged in a certain – undoubtedly community-building – activity called demonstration or protest, which also runs by a more common and colloquial name in our sweet mother tongue best translated as *outray*. These days (*early tens*), when using this term, we think about that publicly perpetrated group or mass activity, which we reluctantly but regularly insert into our daily routine, coming from work, the dentist, perhaps the hairdresser, or before going to the market to buy some beef shank for the soup. Protests have become so frequent these days that it has become domesticated, so to say, a quotidian activity, whereas originally it was meant to *stand out* from the quotidian so that people could notice that something was happening, *for crying out loud!* Then again, it does not have to be so conspicuous, as it is also possible to protest privately, at home, for instance – a little Hungarian taxonomy of protests – when we ostentatiously switch from the Hungarian state channel to Animal Planet. Swoosh, and we've performed a wholesome protest, viewer statistics are plummeting and we have saved ourselves from ulcer or restless leg syndrome (cf.: *healthcare protest*). Or, for instance, when we demand that our university-age children, or better yet, students, write their dissertations themselves, for who knows, one day they may be presidents of the state or what-not (cf.: *education protest*). The question is whether, if the practice of protesting becomes so regular, it can still be called protesting, or rather (splash, boom(?)), quantity becomes quality) it would be more appropriate to call it revolution. Not in the stuffy voting booth, but just like that, under God's blue sky, *by the people, for the people*.



On the other hand, protests are worthy of attention in the 2010s of the Third Republic of Hungary not merely for their frequency, but also because they can be considered significant yet ephemeral historical memorials that deserve to be recorded in several formats. Moreover, these are the kind of rare activities that can have anthropological, sociological, political and – without the intention of aestheticizing the political – certain undoubtedly aesthetic aspects all at once. After all, a demonstration is a theatrical event in the course of which the political will of the participants is performed. This is precisely why it is hard to avoid the question of when and how the genre of demonstration becomes distinguishable from performance art and protest art. In other words, what kinds of codes and consensus are in place regarding where protest ends and art begins; where and how the public space is separated from the public stage. Here I will mention only the most important aspect: instead of representing someone, the protester is identical with what and who we see; his or her presence is, therefore, purely autobiographical and the purpose of his presence is to express a political opinion and will – and now I shall disregard those instances where the subjects of

dictatorships are present at demonstrations by command. Then again, homeless people, for instance, are also not a representation of poverty and vulnerability: this is their life itself, and not voluntarily, but as a constraint (cf., for instance, with hunger strike), and they have no aim and purpose with it except survival. Then again, as contemporary life becomes increasingly aestheticized by the media, the difference between reality and performance (art) becomes more and more blurred, reality becomes hyperreality, and – not less problematically – the mere knowledge (information) of reality rarely turns into *acknowledging* it (cf. Stanley Cavell's binary terms: *knowing and acknowledging*), which would prompt conscious, if only mental, *action*.

Excerpt from the demo-critical, monthly series "A bomlás virágai" published in the *Mozgó Világ* between 2012-13. Translated by Dániel Sipos.

↑ Katarina Šević and Gergely László, *The Curfew*, performance, 28th October 2017, Photo by: Boglárka Zellei.

Good enough¹

On *The Curfew* and OFF-Biennale

Hajnalka Somogyi

In early October 2016, I wrote a letter to Katarina and Gergely. It happened amidst preparations for the second edition of OFF-Biennale Budapest², a grassroots collaborative art project I had been coordinating and co-curating since its beginnings in late 2013. I had a somewhat vague idea for a project, to be presented in the framework of OFF's second iteration, and in the e-mail I asked if they felt like working together. In the description attached, I wrote things like:

As a project to inaugurate OFF2, I propose to organize a process/rally/demonstration on the streets of the city centre of Budapest. Inspired by the central metaphor of OFF2 – Gaudiopolis³ – this project offers an occasion for participants to find strength and joy in acting against a general mood of political and civil frustration and passivity, and contribute in taking the visual/theatrical quality of Hungarian democratic protest to a new level.

[...]

A rally in which visuality, sound, performance, play and laughter have a determining role can enact freedom and democracy and make them tangible – whether this incites or irritates.

[...]

The goal of the first OFF-Biennale Budapest was to provide a common platform and an action plan for a very fragmented and disheartened local art scene. Acting together to sustain critical, independent art and thinking has been the backbone of its idealist ethos, in a context where anti-democratic, segregationist, xenophobic, and nepotistic tendencies were on the rise. After tracing the possibility of an independent art scene, gathering some strength in collectivity, while keeping a separatist attitude vis à vis the state infrastructure, the next move, in the frame of OFF2, should be to step forth and demonstrate art's competence, courage and commitment in politics beyond the typical biennale setting with exhibitions, screenings and small-scale performances politely scattered around the city.

[...]

And so on. A grand vision of some accumulation of energy, some constellation of civil and artistic statements articulated in solidarity.

It was not the first time that one of us sought out the others with a nascent plot. This was how Katarina and I founded the semi-independent, semi-artist-run space Dinamo in Budapest in 2002; and this was the way another collaboration, an independent space under the name Impex – Contemporary Art Provider, which involved all three of us and some other friends, had started in 2006. These were the good old days. A year later I left for the USA to study, and Impex closed for good in 2008. In the following years, Katarina and Gergely in a way went on though, gathering together various groups of people for a number of art projects, all based on collaboration. So it must have been, among other discomforts, a sense of nostalgia (not so much for the old context but for a sense of personal commitment and group work) that, years later, when I was back in Budapest and they were away, having since moved to Berlin, prompted me to conceive of yet another platform that would enable collaboration. That was OFF-Biennale – a secret plan of many from the first moment on.

While it is impossible to duly describe the political and social context⁴ in which the idea of OFF-Biennale was born and raised, one must mention at least one further emotion that surely motivated it. It was the frustration felt at seeing not only the harsh and abrupt (or, at other times, slow and sneaky) changes in the (cultural) life of the country but also the passivity on the one hand, and the good-willed, but ineffectual protest on the other, with which the art scene reacted.

OFF-Biennale proposes a mode of operation in the local social field of art that all who participate can stand for, being based on a collaboration of equals, mutual support and on other values such as freedom of expression, independence from party-political agendas and transparency. It is a model that we wish would cease to be “off” (as it is in the current context) and become, for lack of a better word: normal. In this way, OFF has a performative character. Which also means that, to a certain degree, it is a simulation: being an international mega-event with several hundred participants coming from twenty plus countries and upwards of fifty venues across the city and the country, it appears to be a festival proper (sometimes even too much so), a new entity able to become an anti-pole to state representation, stable and secure, with firm bases. Do not get me wrong, the artists and the venues are real. But pulling off such a large-scale state-free spectacle with the means and props we can gather (around 130–150 thousand EUR per edition and a minimal, temporarily available infrastructure ill-equipped to accommodate intended projects) has been an almost absurd endeavor.

¹ Also as a reference to the title of an essay very useful in the current context: “So Far, So Good: Contemporary Fascism, Weak Resistance, and Postartistic Practices in Today's Poland” by Ewa Majewski and Kuba Szreder, *e-flux journal*, no. 76 (October 2016): <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/76/71467/so-far-so-good-contemporary-fascism-weak-resistance-and-postartistic-practices-in-today-s-poland/>.

² An international contemporary art event, OFF-Biennale Budapest (with two editions held in 2015 and 2017) is the largest civil, independent arts initiative in Hungary. Organized on a grassroots basis, it is a DIY biennale based on self-organization and a collaboration of artists, curators, other cultural and civil organizations, galleries and students, among others. As opposed to many mega-events, the curatorial board does not curate the whole programme: besides proposing a number of projects itself – such as *The Curfew* by Katarina Šević and Gergely László in 2017 – it also offers the possibility to stakeholders of the local scene to apply with projects through an open-call process. There is a requirement that participating projects be realized independently, which means that our association organizing the biennale does not provide financial or logistical support beyond a necessary minimum. It offers the coordination and local and international promotion of the whole event, with communication platforms and a media and street campaigns, international networking and documentation. The resulting programme is thus the common curatorial achievement of around thirty to forty individuals and groups, and the biennale works as an umbrella that amplifies the voices of individual projects. OFF-Biennale does not apply for Hungarian state funding and steers clear from state-run art institutions. This has many points of rationale and many consequences, a major reason being that today public money is mostly available under unacceptable terms and conditions. An important effect is that the biennale works completely nomadically, without any pre-given infrastructure. OFF-Biennale aims to strengthen the local independent art scene. It strives to take part in the social discourse on public issues and to enhance the culture of democracy by the means of art.

³ “Gaudiopolis, or ‘The City of Joy’ (1945–1950) was the name of a Children's Republic founded in the aftermath of World War II in Budapest by Lutheran pastor Gábor Sztehló. His orphanage provided shelter and home for hundreds of children regardless of their religion, social background or nationality, who lost their parents to the war. Children dwellers of the ‘City of Joy’ formed their own government, elected their representatives and adopted laws that applied to everybody (including teachers). This community set out to learn democracy anew and, eliminating all social barriers in the spirit of Christ's gospel, to educate children to become ‘independent, self-conscious, practically trained and theoretically qualified citizens striving for better self-understanding and self-criticism.’ [...] The story of Gaudiopolis is relevant even today. This mini-republic of trust, generosity, responsibility and care serves as inspiration to both the projects and the working methods of OFF-Biennale. Even though war tragedies today reach Europe primarily through the masses of refugees or media reports, our micro- and macro-environment are infused with social and political crisis once again; that of liberal democracy [...]. Thus, we must reassess the implications of personal commitment, education, community development and the sustainability of democracy, as well as rethink, in this context, the potential role of children, playfulness, joy – and art.” Excerpt from the curatorial concept of *Gaudiopolis 2017*, the second edition of OFF-Biennale Budapest (29 Sept–5 Nov 2017): www.offbiennale.hu.

⁴ A very brief account, mostly focusing on the cultural/art scene: In the years following 2010, when the right-wing Fidesz party came into power, the implementation of a radical agenda took place in the field of art that aimed to annex the institutional system and to replace the intellectual elite. Most institutions have been placed in the charge of politically loyal but unqualified leaders; the majority of public spending on art has become nontransparent and is done by publicly unaccountable, non-professional bodies; institutional autonomy has been ridiculed by centralization, by new laws and regulations; protection measures of national heritage have ceased to exist, there is only real estate and minable treasure at the hands of governmental bodies and their contractors.

However, besides a high-degree of self-exploitation, which is admittedly the project's least fun and sustainable feat, the very absurdity of the undertaking has activated other assets such as professional bonds rooted in earlier projects, the goodwill of people who like what OFF represents and friendships (more about this later).

This tour de force character, which defined the first edition even more than the second, has been a necessity. We all felt a critical mass was needed (literally as well as figuratively) to achieve our rather modest goal. Through the political act of collectively naming our activities OFF-Biennale and in coordinating the necessary logistics, we aimed to make independent energies visible, critical voices audible and to show that it is possible to avoid the negative compromises state subsidies usually entail – to ourselves (read: art people), to the public. In the context of a partly paralyzed, partly complicit cultural scene in which critique remains a goal in and of itself⁵ and is, as OFF co-curator Nikolett Eröss has pointed out, rarely used as means to develop some plan of action, OFF has also been a demonstration, in the more concretely political sense of the word.

And here we should finally return to Katarina and Gergely reading my proposal for an art-demo in the fall of 2016, answering right away with a lot of enthusiasm and a little reservation.

Having left Hungary when possibilities for critical art practices had started to wane, they certainly shared this sense of frustration over the state of matters, especially in terms of what the already internalized imperative of censorship concerned. While, legally, freedom of speech is still granted to the citizens of Hungary, under various everyday pressures and more or less direct threats, most individuals have already learned what to say and what to suppress. After so many disappointments in liberal democracy experienced in previous decades, what people demand and what the government promises to supply is security, and so it follows that merchants of freedom such as artists and liberal intellectuals seem to gesticulate in a vacuum. A conspicuous sign of this promised safety is the recent outcropping of paramilitary and security forces – from an anti-terrorist action force and civilian patrols near the southern borders to pensioner-guards loitering around subway platforms – dressed in uniform or, at least, a neon yellow vest, boasting their risk-taking so that we can relax. So what if one fine day security guards – living, breathing symbols of the new order – miraculously emerged from their sulky routines and realized their inner need for freedom and an even more pressing need to ensure it to others? My artist friends wanted to know.

At the same time, they did not share my impulse to make it big and one-time; rather, they

argued for a repeated, potentially regular presence in public space and, consequently, for a smaller-scale, more focused approach. No carnival, no cacophony of competing artistic takes in a short timeframe that might pass relatively unnoticed. As I was feeling stuck with my initial ideas and increasingly busy with the more pragmatic aspects of the coming OFF-Biennale, I was glad to follow the direction they proposed.

What I was most happy about was that our paths had crossed again. Ultimately, OFF has created an opportunity to reconnect with far-away friends, artists and curators who had left the country in the preceding years, or long ago.⁶ It invited them to add their own viewpoints to the complex discourse on problems and strategies. And so as the idea of *The Curfew* – as a collaborative demo-performance in public space – was taking shape, it started to amplify (as if speaking into an egg-shaped megaphone) some of the concerns and stakes of the *off-grid, collaborative, performative biennale-demonstration* that is OFF. Working outside of the white cube and the local institutional art system, as well as tackling issues of wide-ranging collaboration, performativity and the loaded relation of art and demonstration, both the art project and OFF had to move outside usual comfort zones. As a result, questions such as “Who is in?”, “Who cares?” or “What can happen?” (including legal consequences) acquired a new sense of gravity.

Moreover, beyond the above outlined parities in stakes, method and content, there is a strong interdependence between *The Curfew* and OFF that, curiously, does not seem to limit either entity. I believe that, aside from OFF, there is no institution, organization or initiative in Hungary that would or could have produced and presented something like *The Curfew* in 2017; and in turn, OFF-Biennale would lose ground without projects such as this, where their creators are willing to take the bumpy ride in order to do stuff that would flip out detectors of local self-censorship, that sparks public imagination and points in directions toward something more just and livable. Actually, this kind of interdependence, and the pressure it creates, which demands a constant reconsideration of what is most critical for a project like OFF, is one of the worthwhile aspects that these otherwise utterly and increasingly depressing times have brought about. It provides a sense of urgency and, against all odds, a good enough reason to get out of bed each day.

As ideological directives have been articulated loud and clear as have the results of resistance been made clear, by now most institutions and media outlets have internalized governmental expectation. Therefore, censorship can be called structural – be it in distributing public funds, granting exhibition possibilities and other permits or voicing in the media (public as well as commercial, being controlled by the government and its supporters, respectively). This brings back an era of “official” and “non-official” art, of “first” and “second publicity”.

All this is of course part of the establishment of an “illiberal democracy”, indeed a fascist regime that sometimes seems to only serve and cover up a most cynical opportunism. The only clearly discernible strategy of the government serves the cementing of its own power and thus the road to wealth for a closed circle: through the distribution of public money among themselves and their supporters, effectively establishing a loyal and powerful oligarchy on the one hand; by intimidating and hindering civil and political opposition via new regulations that compromise civil rights; and by deploying such corrupted authorities as the tax office, the police, the court of auditors, or the prosecution to discourage non-aligned action.

⁵ A standpoint hard to defend as the government this critique would address rules out any kind of dialogue. Ultimately, critique becomes short-circuited and remains among those who agree.

⁶ An incomplete list of such Hungarians living abroad, who contributed to one or both editions of OFF-Biennale: curators/researchers Kata Krasznahorkai and Kati Simon (Critique&Culture, Berlin), Krisztina Hunya (Zónotéka, Berlin), Edit Molnár (Edith-Russ-Haus, Oldenburg), Livia Páldi (Projects Art Centre, Dublin), Borbála Soós (Tenderpixel, London), Virág Major (Berlin), Franciska Zólyom (GfZK, Leipzig); and artists András Blazsek, István Csákány, Attila Csörgő, Júlia Geröcs, Ferenc Gróf, Hajnal Németh, Tímea Oravec, Beatrix Szörényi, Zsolt Vársárhelyi, and Brigitta Zics. Katarina Šević and Gergely László presented the exhibition and performance *Alfred Palestra* in the frame of the first edition.

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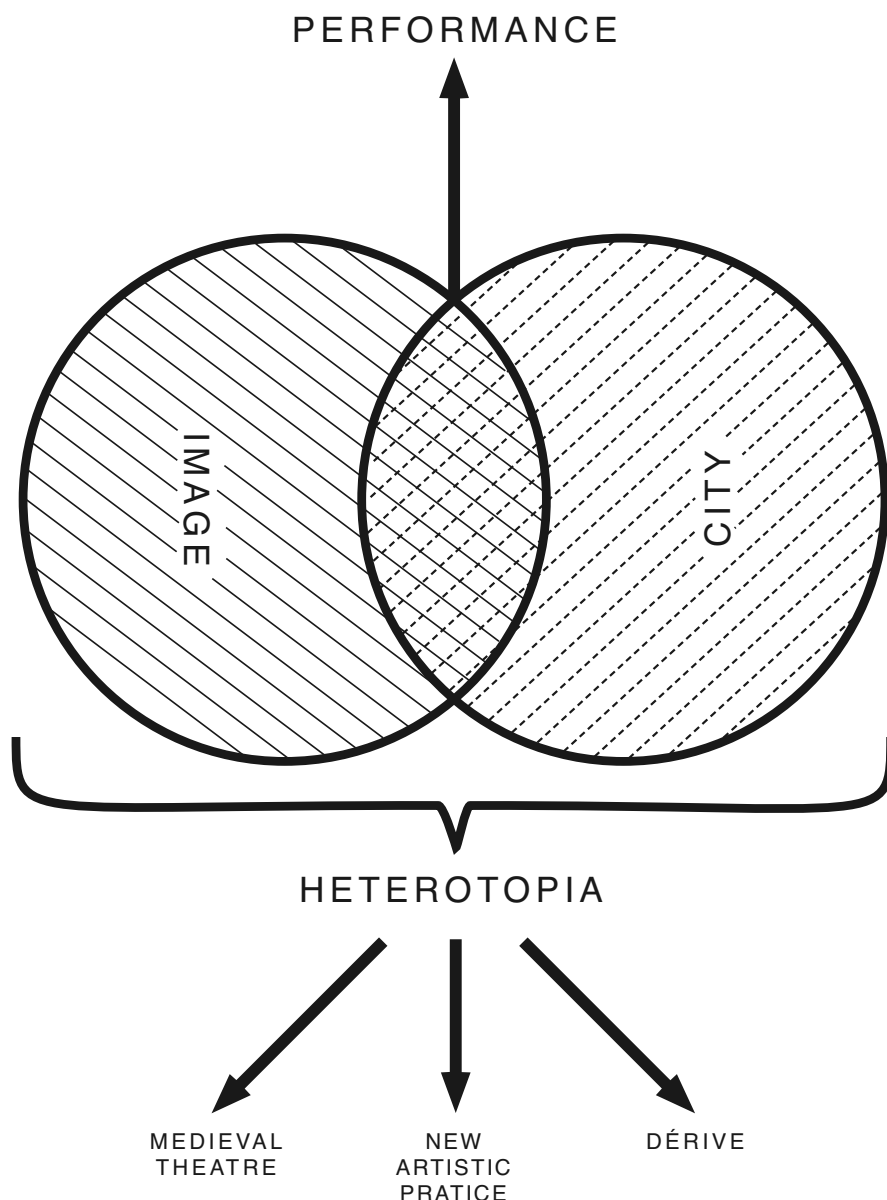
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Disturbing (the) image of the neoliberal city

Explanatory notes on the diagram

Andrej Mirčev

Locating *The Curfew* project at the intersection of image and the city, the diagram proposes a multi-layered reading of the performance, which foregrounds its temporary intervention in the environment of urban space. The procession of the oversized egg accompanied by 15 performers transforms the streets and squares of Budapest into a mobile theatre stage, whose manifestations are visual, corporeal and sonic at the same time. In his book on the *Image of the City*, in which he writes about the readability and orientation in urban spaces, Kevin Lynch articulates the following thesis: "Moving elements in a city, and in particular the people and their activities, are as important as the stationary physical parts. We are not simply observers of this spectacle, but are ourselves a part of it, on the stage with other participants. Most often, our perception of the city is not sustained, but rather partial, fragmentary, mixed with other concerns. Nearly every sense is in operation and the image is the composite of them all." Accepting the idea that an image is a composite of different senses, with the diagram I am arguing that *The Curfew* creates and performs such a multisensual image and by doing so, it destabilizes the neoliberal image of the city. This constellation, in which the performative image of the mobile egg exposes the *imageability* of city (the term Lynch uses to describe the legibility and visibility of urban structures) exposes the saturation of public space with a variety of signifiers of commodification.



More precisely said, looking at the photos and video of the performance, what caught my (visual) attention was to what extent the cityscape is jammed with billboards, posters and all kind of signs of corporate economy. Another associative link the performance triggered was Michel Foucault's notion of the heterotopia. In the short text *On Other Spaces: Heterotopias and Utopias* published one year before the revolutionary events in 1968, Foucault proposes to think the present epoch as the epoch of space; instead of the 19th century obsession with temporality, Foucault argues, "our" time is that of simultaneity and juxtaposition. Focusing on the notion of the heterotopia, the French philosopher convincingly points out to the potentiality of certain spaces and spatial practices to bring forth other meanings and functions of one space, beyond its primary.

He writes: "The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. Thus it is that the theater brings onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another." Isn't this precisely what the performance does and sets in motion? Transmuting streets and squares of Budapest into heterotopic sites on which the *otherness* of the city is rehearsed and addressed? Navigating between a medieval procession theatre and a situationist modus of urban intervention, *The Curfew* performance defamiliarizes the commodified space, offering the perspective of a more ludic and human city.